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GLIMPSSES AT MANITOBA HISTORY



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GLIMPSES AT MANITOBA HISTORY

Two years ago we all took a day off, even in the busy month of July, to celebrate Manitoba's sixtieth year in the sisterhood of Canadian provinces. Some good citizens were surprised that we had reached even this three score. Others delighted in telling to patient listeners such as Rotary clubs that Manitoba was really very much older than sixty years, that we have indeed an authentic, documented, white man history of more than five times sixty, actually three hundred and twenty years.

Since I am among friends, this evening I think I can dare to say—perhaps in a whisper—that Manitoba's white man history *may* go back twice as far as that, may go back *ten* times sixty years. I offered to your committee to tell about boats up the Red River nearly six centuries ago, but they chose to hear about Manitoba history rather than what might be called Manitoba mythology. Perhaps they knew very well that the Kensington Stone, like King Charles' Head, would be sure to come in somewhere. And, as you can see, here it is.

If white men were up the Red River in 1362, as I think they were, one guess as to their race will be enough. Of course they were Scandinavians. This adventure of theirs began three and a half centuries after Leif Ericson found Vinland, and nearly a century and a half before Christopher Columbus re-discovered America just where the Scandinavians had known it was for five centuries, and where they had told Columbus it was when he visited Iceland (as he did) before his voyage, to get all the tips they could give. It is quite possible they even told Columbus about the very voyage in search of the missing Greenland colonists that led into the Hudson's Bay and up the Red River. These first Red River Voyageurs were men of strong Christian faith, and their expedition was a crusade. They fought their way into the heart of the continent to find and bring back brethren thought to have been carried away into heathendom by the Skraelinger. I will admit that controversy still wages over this expedition, but after hearing so far as I have been able, all the yeas and all the nays, I am strongly inclined to think that the yeas have it.

We must not forget that long before white men history began there was red man history. But the Indians who roamed in the Manitoba wildernesses cut no hieroglyphics in stone, and in the hard migratory lives they lived, the memory of the more remote past of their race easily faded away. I think you can forget the interesting theory of a pre-Indian race of Mound Builders. In this part of the continent, at any rate, what mounds there are were built and used by Indians as special places of burial, and, more seldom, of worship.

As you likely know, from Newfoundland to the Rockies, and from the sub-Arctic south to the level of Minneapolis and Pennsylvania all the many and various tribes belonged to four great families. In the North were the Athabascans, toward the south Iroquois (east) and Sioux (west), and in all the rest of the huge territory the many tribes of the great Algonquin family from Micmacs in the Maritimes to Bloods and Blackfeet in Alberta. The bulk of Manitoba Indians were of the Algonquin tribes Nahathaway (David Thompson's name for them) or Cr  e, and Ojibbeway. The Assinboines or Stoneys, numerous in the south-western part of what is now Manitoba, were of the Sioux race.

The most intelligent and advanced Indians in this region were the Mandan and kindred tribes who lived in villages of wood and clay houses on the upper Missouri, cultivated the soil, and peddled their products of corn, dried squash, tobacco, sunflower oil, up into Manitoba, east, almost to the Great Lakes and westward and southward as well. Though they were not in Manitoba territory these influential sedentary tribes entered very definitely into Manitoba history both before and after the white men came. They were of Sioux race but quite different from the Dakotas who were the wolfish savage Sioux. It was the Dakotas whose forays northward reddened the waters of the Qu'Appelle, the Cypress, the Souris, and gave to Nettley Creek the name "The River of Death." But it is fair to say that in time these savage Sioux became as firm friends of the white men north of the forty-ninth parallel as they were deadly enemies of the white man to the south of that line.

In the authentic documented white man history of Manitoba there are five distinct and colorful periods. The first might be called the *Period of Discovery*. Like many another pearl of great price, Manitoba was found more or less by happy chance. It was a by-product of the search for a North-West passage. First after the Scandinavians, in 1497, John and Sebastian Cabot bombarded the Northern fastnesses and fields of ice, and from that time until well beyond the middle of the nineteenth century—that is, for nearly four centuries—the search for a passage to Asia, on the North of the American Continent was a favorite outdoor sport of the British people. The spirit of the quest is revealed in the quaint conceits of old Martin Frobisher who “being persuaded of a new and nearer passage to Cataya determined and resolved with himself to go make full proof thereof and to accomplish or bring true certificate of the truth, or else never to return again. *Knowing this to be the only thing of the world that was left yet undone whereby a notable mind might be made famous and fortunate.*” So good Queen Bess waved farewell from her window to the little craft dropping down the Thames on its great adventure. It is sometimes said to be hard to get an idea into the head of a Briton. At any rate, it seems to be even harder to get one out. When the North-West passage was found at length, it was of no special use to anybody, and it had cost many lives and much treasure. But what mattered that? It was a four-century job done, and well done, at last. Perhaps it was an eight century job done, for it is pretty well established that the Scandinavians reached well up Davis Strait at least six centuries ago.

If the early adventurers had really been hunting for Manitoba, the first searcher to get “hot”, after the disputed Scandinavians of 1362, was Henry Hudson, who sailed in his ship “Discovery” with “three and twentie persons,” in 1610, into the broad strait and mighty inland sea that bear his name. But, so far as we know, he touched only the Labrador side.

Authentic white man history in Manitoba began two years later, in 1612, 320 years ago, when Thomas Button, with two ships, the “Discovery” and the “Resolution”, landed near the mouth of a great river, which he named Nelson after his sailing master who died there. Here first the Empire flag was tossed

aloft to flutter in the breezes that fan our cheeks today. I said that Manitoba had been discovered by accident. When Thomas Button made landfall upon it he had in his pocket a letter from King James of England to The Emperor of Japan, or any other Eastern Potentate he might meet in with.

Even-if Manitoba wasn't the country he was looking for, it was something,—so Button raised a cross, hoisted the flag of England, poked the noses of his two little ships into Root Creek, somewhere near what is now York factory, and spent a winter which we can be sure was something to write home about.

That flag was raised over Manitoba in August of the year 1612, so soon after the defeat of the Spanish Armada that likely enough Captain Button had Armada veterans in his crew. Queen Bess had scarcely had time yet to turn over in her grave on account of the doings of her kinsman, James. William Shakespeare was still writing and acting plays. Quebec City, founded by Samuel Champlain, was just four years old. The island of Montreal had still thirty years to wait for the coming of its founder, Maisonneuve. Our flag flew on Manitoba soil eight full years before the Mayflower cast anchor opposite Plymouth Rock, loaded from stem to stern with ancestors and antiques.

We like to ask today,—who is behind this movement, or that? Who was behind Thomas Button? It was the *Company of the Merchants of London*. Another expedition about that time had behind it, *The Fellowship of the Merchant Venturers of Bristol*. We know very well the later *Governor and Company of the Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay*. Still later, there was *The French Company of the North*, and one of the earliest and most eventful of the ventures was under the auspices of King Christian the Fourth of Denmark.

That was the expedition of *Jens Munck*, with 64 men, in the ships "Unicorn" and "Lamprey." First of all white men, so far as we know, they discovered our harbor, Churchill, spent there the winter of 1619-20, so that the river came to be called the Danish River or the River of Strangers. At Christmas there was a sermon and an offering. There was not much money in the collection, but they gave white fox skins to line the priest's coat. When Easter came the priest and most of the crew had rotted and died of scurvy. Only four could sit up to hear the

sermon the commander read. By June only three were left alive to sail the smaller ship back to Denmark.

Henry Hudson and Thomas Button were followed by a goodly company, Robert Bylot, William Baffin of Baffin's Bay, Thomas James of James' Bay, who also visited Churchill, Luke Fox of Fox Channel, Captain Stannard, Captain Zachariah Gillingham who, if I remember rightly, was a stout old boy of eighty, and still others. The picture of this Period of Discovery is a picture of blunt-nosed, bunt, high-pooed little craft daring giant bergs of ice, poking into bay and strait and river: a picture of great-hearted sailors whose fathers had been with Drake and Hawkins when they singed the Spanish King's beard; a picture of merchant venturers in counting houses in Bristol and London who had begun perforce to forget the spices and gems of the Orient, and to console themselves with the richer furs of a new empire of the North.

The second of the five periods of authentic Manitoba history is a *Period of Trade Monopoly and of International Strife*. It began in 1670 when King Charles the Second granted to his cousin Prince Rupert and seventeen other gentlemen and merchants, "the sole trade and commerce of all those seas, straits, bays, rivers, lakes, creeks and sounds in whatsoever latitude they shall be, that lie within the entrance of the straits commonly called Hudson's Straits, together with all the lands and territories upon the countries, coasts and confines of the seas, etc., aforesaid that are not already actually possessed by, or granted to, any of our subjects, or possessed by the subjects of any other Christian prince or state." The bright idea of this huge monopoly actually originated with two Frenchmen, Radisson and Groselliers, who carried a fortune in furs out of the Bay, only to be put in jail by their countrymen for dodging the customs at Quebec. Out of spite, they carried their plan to London. The charter was not yet two years old when another party of Frenchmen walked over from Quebec to the Bay to see what they could do about it. Then they sailed around into the Bay, ship after ship, and year after year, to enquire about it still farther. Forts were taken and re-taken, one with "a fortune in furs but not a morsel to eat." Four times in four years one flag went down and the other went up. D'Iberville won a smashing

naval victory on the Bay. Fort Prince of Wales, the Gibraltar of the North, was built; then taken and deliberately blown up.

So, with the help of the home fleets and sometimes not very much courage on their own part, the Gentlemen Adventurers held doggedly to the edges of the Bay. But, except for the adventure of Henry Kelsey, the company knew and held, and cared to know or to hold, only the edges of the Bay.

The third of the five periods, and the most romantic of all, was the *Period of Fur Trade Rivalry*. There have been several gates into what is now western Canada. The first gate to open, and the only gate for a century and a quarter, was the North-East gate, the gate of the Hudson's Bay. But in 1738 a Canadian-born Adventurer broke open an Eastern gate, the gate of the Great Lakes and Lesser Lakes. We have taken this great man to our hearts as La Verendrye, but on dress occasions his full name is Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Verendrye. Step by step, with post after post, at Rainy River, Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg, he advanced to his headquarters at Fort la Reine—Portage la Pairie. Here even before his Fort was finished, his first thought was to visit the remarkable Mandan people on the upper Missouri, marking his stages by the "First Mountain," Pembina, and the "Second Mountain," Turtle. Afterwards the La Verendryes built Fort Dauphin on Lake Winnipegosis, Fort Bourbon on Cedar Lake, Fort Pascoyac on the Saskatchewan, and Fort Rouge at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red. Le Verendrye was essentially an explorer. He dreamed not of peltries, but of finding the way to the western sea. He and his sons unrolled for us our map South to the Missouri, North to the Saskatchewan, and West almost to the foothills of the Rockies. But when this Greatheart died in 1749, his dreams pretty much died with him. What he had gained was largely lost.

At this time the "English Company" still hugged the Bay, had only 120 employees, and was charged in the courts of England with non-use of its charter. La Verendrye had not disturbed its sleep. It was upon this peaceful fold of easy trade that the wolves came down like the Assyrian, from the Eastern gate. When one mentions early trade and trading posts, ninety-nine out of a hundred Manitobans say, "Oh yes! You mean the

Hudson's Bay Company." True, we have had that steady-going Company, always with us, but the spectacular, aggressive combination of the active period of the fur-trade rivalry was the North West Company. The old Company, sheltered behind a royal charter, on a great Bay that brought its shipping almost to the middle of the continent, had the easy-going policy of making the Indians do the travelling. It suffered a tremendous shock when wild men from Montreal who cared never a fig for any king-granted monopoly, began to peddle their wares, and gather their furs, almost within the sacred precincts of the forts along the Bay. These new traders put in practice the preposterous policy of sending the trader to the Indian. Before the old Company had time to waken, rub its eyes and bestir itself more than half its trade was gone. Joseph Frobisher wintered in 1774 near what is now the town of Selkirk. Peter Pond wintered on Lake Dauphin on his way to a colorful career farther North-West. Along every stream in the North-West pushed the adventurous prow of the new traders. In 1774 the "English Company" began to take up the challenge. Since the new traders were largely Highlanders who did not find Scotland comfortable so soon after "forty-five" the Hudson's Bay Company named its first post away from the Bay after the "Butcher of Colloden," Cumberland House.

The traders of the Eastern gate were at immense disadvantage. The older Company could bring knife or gun or kettle from Birmingham or Sheffield through their North-East gate into the hands of the Indian in a year, and the peltries back to London in another year. But it took the St. Lawrence traders, with hard labor and many dangers two years to get trade goods to the Indians and two years more to market the furs.

To make up for these disadvantages, the independent traders were compelled to combine, or, at least, co-operate. Thus was formed, in 1783, the loose-jointed North-West Company, and with it began the period of active trade rivalry, known as the "opposition." Where one Company went the other followed and built alongside. Westward to the Pacific and northward to the Arctic exploration was pushed, chiefly by the North Westers. At nearly every river "forks" were rival posts, log houses with surrounding palisades and bastions, at the mouths

of the Winnipeg, the Red, the Assiniboine, the Pembina, the Souris, the Qu'Appelle, at Portage la Prairie, at the big bend of the Assiniboine where Virden is now, at the big bend where the Assiniboine nears the Swan, around lake Dauphin along the Swan River, and through the farther North. Bad enough as was the rivalry between the North Westers and the Hudson's Bay Company, it was worse and more wasteful in the five or six years during which the X. Y. Company, a split away from the North Westers, was in the field. Worst of all was the soaking of the Indians with alcohol, not so much sold as given in bribes. From many journals we can reconstruct the life of that day almost as easily as that of the pioneer farmers of 1880. At Pembina a cart was devised with solid wheels in 1801, straight spokes in 1802, and the fully developed Red River pattern, with dished wheels, squeak and all, in 1803. It is a mistake to suppose that relations between scattered agents of the two companies were all in the spirit of Seven Oaks. They were really not so very bad for the most part, and a keen rivalry in trade still left it possible to attend one another's dances and funerals, to drink together at the New Year, to borrow and lend, and even trade, to act together in emergencies, even to agree together where both should build, and occasionally even make, or continue, warm personal friendships.

I spoke of international warfare waged along the boundaries of Manitoba in the period of Discovery. In the period of Trade Rivalry there was international friction also, but more in the manner of opera bouffe. The first road to and from the South was not along the Red River, but along the Souris, to the west of Turtle Mountain. Up and down this trail, in the early seventeen nineties, were carried international challenges and defiance very full of sound and fury. Was young Uncle Sam irritated about something? No. The power that opposed the trade of the North Westers with the Mandan Indians, and the power that still claimed sovereignty of the upper Missouri, was not the new Republic of the United States, but the old Kingdom of Spain. Recent research in Spanish archives has brought to light this teapot tempest. The Spanish governor who concocted the fiery messages carried north, it is interesting to note, was James McKay, a former North Wester, and his agent one John

Evans, who before he became a Spanish citizen and agent, was searching through America for the mythical Indians who could speak the Welsh tongue.

While the two companies, the North Westers and the Hudson's Bay Company, were left to themselves, relations were on the whole not so very much worse than can be found occasionally between rival traders across a village street. It was a third party that made the eternal triangle, and brought, not peace, but a sword. This third party, peaceful and innocent enough in themselves, was the party of Selkirk colonists that opened the fourth period of Manitoba history, *the Colonial Period*.

A visionary Scot dreamed of settling distant colonies with crofters dispossessed at home. Being a persistent Scot (or is there any other kind?), he carried his scheme through. He bought an empire of 116,000 square miles, more than eight times the original size of the province of Manitoba, and almost half as large as the Manitoba of today. This land he had never seen he bought in London for ten shillings lawful money, and once he had the sheepskin title in his hand, he had no doubt whatsoever about his right to dispose of its land as he wished and rule its people as he chose. It was this idea of absolute ownership of all the land and absolute lordship over all the people that was at the bottom of all the trouble. Even the wilds of the North wanted no revival of feudalism.

Lord Selkirk was an honest man according to his lights and aristocratic limitations, but who in Manitoba today could ever imagine a claim of ownership and overlordship of 116,000 square miles as a logical conclusion of a ten shilling outlay for a piece of parchment. He who had never even set foot in the territory gave authority to order out of it men like Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, and Simon Fraser—who had explored thousands of miles in it during thirty years. Lord Selkirk's peppery governor, Miles Macdonell, had scarcely a shelter over his head before he enacted and proclaimed that pemmican—that is the staple food for travelling traders—must not be taken out of the country, except by the order of His Majesty, the Governor. The upper Assiniboine Valley was the source of pemmican supply for the two companies. For the main trade

routes this portable food was an essential. The North Westers were not plaster saints, but they had been exploring and making the country since before this absentee Emperor, who had never set foot in it, was born. What would they do? What would anybody do? What was there to do, but resist? Thus began the "Pemmican War," which led after many months to the massacre of Seven Oaks. The rank and file of settlers, who had not been in the least at fault, bore the brunt. The new colony was baptized in blood. Whatever their provocation, and it was great, the North Westers should have stopped far short of massacre. It was their undoing. To the colonists this was "the great crime." To the North Westers it was "the great mistake." It was both crime and mistake, but it led through years of litigation to amalgamation of the two companies, and peace. This settlement of 1821 was not an obliteration of the North Westers, but an amalgamation of the two fairly equal companies, through taking the Hudson's Bay name and enjoying its charter. I can never understand the attitude of Hudson's Bay people of today and Hudson's Bay archives toward the North Westers. Half the life stream of the Hudson's Bay Company after 1821, and the better, more energetic, more intelligent, more forceful, more enterprising half derived from the North West Company. Of the two rivals who became partners over a century ago the company tries to forget the stronger and remember the weaker.

The massacre of Seven Oaks, coming at the end of privations almost unbearable by human body and spirit might, well have utterly broken the colonists and uprooted the colony. But even after this came grasshoppers, and after grasshoppers, floods; and again famine. But at last came plenty and prosperity. Set down like a tiny island in the midst of the waste of a great green ocean, this little settlement lived its isolated life, cultivated its fields with the implements of Boaz and Ruth, trekked out on its half-yearly buffalo hunts, fought for its rights against monopoly, and on the whole lived a happy, almost idyllic, life. In due time a gate from the South opened and to and from Saint Paul, trade wound its slow way in long queues of swaying creaking Red River carts.

The fifth period of Manitoba history is the *Period of Provincial Life*. Like the Colonial Period before it, this also began

with misunderstandings that led to strife, and from strife to bloodshed. If we, the people of Manitoba today, had been here when the Pemmican law was promulgated by the agent of Lord Selkirk in 1814 I am convinced that not one of us would have upheld the law-maker, but that all would have been law-breakers. And if we had all been here in the late sixties I am sure we would not all have chosen the same side of the controversy. If you wish to keep the easy belief that in the troubles of 1870 one side was always and altogether right, and the other side always and altogether wrong, then don't on any account venture to investigate the facts. You would find the aspirations of some good citizens on both sides, and not so very different aspirations either, if one could just have understood the other better. And on both sides you would find flagrant wrongs. The good citizen of today should either weigh both sides of the troubles of 1870 in the equal scales of justice, or, perhaps still better, forget the whole affair.

And, besides the troubles Wölseley came to end, was there not a brand new Spence's Republic at Portage la Prairie, and a Fenian Republic, all framed up South of the line, everything fixed but the fighting? Apparently everybody wanted to govern in this Red River parish, and none to be governed.

Perhaps even her troubles made the Red River colony known. At any rate in the seventies people singly and in groups began to sprinkle across the prairie, and peacefully till the teeming soil. In 1875, by a hard, long road, came the Icelanders, to endure all the privations of pioneers they had been prepared for, and in addition decimation by the plague of Small Pox, until they might well have given up in despair, but did not. The Mennonites came, and their old world villages sprang up in new Canadian fields. In the early eighties a very flood of farmer settlers, largely from Ontario, spread over the land, and the prairie began to fulfill its destiny. Low, black, sod-walled and sod-roofed shanties began to dot the green plains, with stout-hearted men and ox-teams, in the offing breaking the prairie sod. Here and there at a shanty door stood a courageous woman looking out over miles of prairie to the smoke of the nearest hearth where dwelt another woman, and very wistfully when the time came near for a baby to be born. The early promises of

the waving crops on these fine fields were often blasted by frost, and wheat refused at the distant railway, was even dumped to rot on the prairie. Hard as life is on prairie farms today, it is not so bare and hard as the lives of the pioneers. But they lived gloriously because they lived in hope.

I'm afraid that in many respects the new province started out with an inferiority complex. Eastern cousins would have it that ours was a dead flat province, a no man's land, with no beauty, no inspiration for art or poetry, and no history. These things were very far from true, but unfortunately, we believed them. It was in truth at the beginning a mere "postage stamp" province of 13,000 square miles, less than one-eighth of the empire of Assiniboia that Lord Selkirk bought from the Hudson's Bay Company. Do you realize how small Manitoba was in the first ten years? Crystal City was in it, but Clearwater was not. Holland was in Manitoba, but Cypress River was in the North-West Territories. Austin was inside, but Sidney was outside. And to the North it was cut even smaller. Winnipeg Beach was within the boundaries, but barely inside, and all to the North of Winnipeg Beach was outside Manitoba.

In time boundaries were extended and later extended again, but Ontario won in a court of law the "disputed territory" that would have given Manitoba the port on Lake Superior that was her economic right. Then came the boom, with its waste and blight. And monopoly in a new form, monopoly in transportation, had to be fought. But schools and churches were being built, sod shanties gave place to log houses, and log houses to frame. Trees were planted, bridges thrown across streams, roads made, marshes drained, municipalities organized, communities built up. Too soon came the interruptions and distractions and the tragedies of the world war, and its disastrous end results in economic disarrangement throughout the whole world.

There is a *sixth* Period of Manitoba history. I cannot give it a name, for it has not yet made its name. It is the period that began, say, with the Sixtieth Anniversary of the creation of the province—the period from 1930 to 1990. I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, so why should I venture to even guess what this new time may bring? But I know that by and large

it will bring what we, the people of Manitoba, make it bring.

What use to us today are these heritages of the past? They can tell us for our encouragement that in the five periods of our history we have lived down more than ten plagues, plagues of bickerings and strife, plagues of open warfare, of pillage, arson and murder, plagues of grasshoppers, plagues of want and famine, plagues of jealousies and misunderstandings, plagues of floods, plagues of monopolies, plagues of booms, the plagues of frost and hail and rust. Surely a people that has conquered all these plagues can find some way to conquer the perplexing plague of depression that seems to baffle the shrewdest of our social physicians.

Of what use to us today are these heritages of the past? Are we not the heirs of these ages? Are we not the heirs of the strong men of the past? Do we not breathe a spirit they breathed into this land? The voice of the vanished maiden still calls from the Lake Qu'Appelle. From all the lakes and rivers of our broad Northland, who calls? From the rocks and bluffs that sheltered their camps, from perils in deep waters and white churning rapids, from the weary portage, and the winding prairie trail, from the scorching summer suns, and the swirl of wintry blizzards, from the plow in the lone furrow and from out of the wastes of silent snow, who calls? We do not live in a bare and empty land. Men of three centuries call back to us out of the past.